

Workshops

Workshop is one of the most powerful tools a writer has. Writers begin to workshop fairly early in classes and often continue through their professional careers.

Workshop is a social contract. Each person will get useful feedback on their work. Each person will earn this by giving useful feedback to others. You should make it a priority not to miss workshop sessions, and if you do you should email your critique to the people whose work is being discussed. Preferably you should send this email within 24 hours of missing a workshop.

The rules I have for workshop and what I will say about it is based on the professional workshops I have been and am a member of.

The ideal number for a workshop group runs from about 4 to a dozen or so. Most workshop groups are organized around some commonality—genre, form, interest, even gender. There are other workshops where the group has deliberately chosen to be open in terms of form and genre—this can be useful but it can also be frustrating when you're trying to critique a story in an unfamiliar genre. Once you have finished the workshops in class, you will be perfectly capable of organizing a workshop group for yourself in the future.

Getting critiqued should be exciting and energizing. You get new perspective and new ideas for what to do with a story.

You do NOT have to take every suggestion. You need to listen, to filter, and to decide which suggestions are useful for you and which are not. That is the major reason why the writer takes notes during critiques—while your colleagues will give you their written notes, it is up to you as the writer to decide what you want to put down for yourself and where this takes you. Deciding an idea is NOT a good idea for you can be as useful as getting a great idea—you may think, “No that’s wrong, it’s like THIS.” And there you have it.

If more than one person notes a problem with something or wants a particular kind of change, listen. If more than two people note something, you probably want to make some changes in that. This is one of the most useful filters in a workshop. And often your workshop mates will catch little things that you wouldn’t think of. (In my professional workshop group, there was a wonderful story by an award winning writer—but I could NOT for the life of me figure out WHEN the story was happening. It was a Christmas story, but whether it happened all one Christmas or part one year and part the next was not something I could figure out. And I told the writer and it was a very easy fix for him to clarify that. But remember, the reader always needs to know WHERE s/he is and WHEN s/he is.)

Sometimes you can only critique a story from the way you would write it. That’s fine. One of the major talents of the professional editor is that they can often (though not always) get into the style/head of a writer and give a critique from within what the writer is doing. Other writers often can’t do that, so don’t worry about it. The main job is to identify areas where the story is working less well than it could, and to think about ways to fix it.

There are workshops where people want to show off their wit and erudition, where their critiques are cruel and, worse, not helpful to the writer. There are workshops where people discuss work in terms of the author and not limit their remarks to the words on the page. That kind of workshop is destructive and of no use to anyone.

It is also possible that someone will critique in the best way possible, but that person and the writer are so distant in thought and technique that the comments are useless. Yes, it is possible for someone to “not get” what you are trying to do. But if they don’t get it in a way you think they ought to, and you think this is a reasonably capable and bright person, then you might want to think about clarifying. Or it might really be such a deep difference and something might be so little their story that they simply cannot be useful to you.

You need to know when to listen to comments, when comments are well-meant but will not help you, and when following the advice of another writer might hurt your own vision.

Workshop is not about ego. It is about a group of writers who are honestly trying to help each other, so they can get good help in return.